

8 Assessment Tips

Easy to Implement Ideas for Thematic Units

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1

Know Where You Are Going

The first step in creating a Thematic Unit is the creation of appropriate assessment tools. Before starting to develop your lesson plans for the unit, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I want my students to be able to do? (When setting your goals, think in terms of real communication like greeting other people appropriately, introducing yourself, ordering food or giving instructions)
- What language are they going to need to use? Think in terms of functional chunks of language (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p. 37) and specific vocabulary

Functional Chunks of Language

"me llamo..." (my name is...)

"me gusta..." (I like...)

"Creo que no." (I don't think so.)

Specific Vocabulary

"un cuarto" (a room)

"la piscina" (the swimming pool)

"cruzar" (to exchange greetings)

After setting your communication and language goals you will need to figure out:

- How will I be able to tell if the students met the objectives? When designing your assessments, create tasks, exercises and projects that "force" them to use those language functions that you had in mind.

2

Have a Plan

- How am I going to prepare the students to perform well in these assessments? When planning out your lessons, try to use teaching strategies that are communicative, student-centered, and as real-to-life as possible. Make it a point to use authentic products such as songs, legends, stories directly from the culture rather than textbook materials

3

Map It Out

Here is a key rule:

Be sure to teach in the same way that you will assess your students. Your assessment should correlate with your everyday lesson plans. For instance if your project involves the creation of a dialogue, the students should see dialogues (puppets, videos, heritage speakers), practice their own impromptu dialogues with different scenarios and evaluate their own performance based on the rubric. If students waste a lot of energy to adapt to the test itself, the assessment becomes an obstacle rather than a tool for measuring progress.

Your assessment (created or modified) must:

- Reflect the objectives targeted in your thematic unit. (Make your students aware of those objectives at the beginning of the unit)
- Feature deliberately planned tasks that are real-to-life, intrinsically motivating and meaningful to you and the students
- Have clearly stated and measurable expectations defined in a rubric, written in student-friendly language. (This rubric must be available to students before starting the project)
- Provide a realistic time frame for completion that is flexible but controlled

4

Test the Test

- Include all the necessary forms and paper trail to track student work.
- Display a variety of samples by fellow students to illustrate the spectrum of project quality from great to poor.
- Appeal to a variety of intelligences and sometimes offer different options for the output.



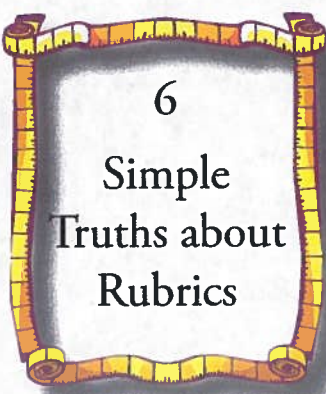
Rubrics are a “must have” when evaluating performances. Well-designed rubrics are useful because they...

- Set clear expectations and prevent misunderstandings of the “you-didn’t-say-that-was-important” variety. Students know exactly what to do and how they will be scored.
- Take the mystery out of the grade.

- Provide an excellent tool to guide the growth of student skills
- Allow for feedback from the teacher and other students on skill strengths and weaknesses

There are many types of rubrics: holistic, analytical, graded and longitudinal. You can find online tools to help you create them. But, it will not be long before you will realize these simple rubrics truths:

- The ACTFL performance guidelines (ACTFL, 1998) take the guesswork out of what is an appropriate level of performance to expect from our learners.
- Creating and modifying rubrics is time consuming. Never underestimate the amount of effort required to make a good rubric. Have it critiqued by colleagues; make sure you wrote it in language students can understand; express every item in measurable terms; and think about outlier performances such as those by heritage speakers.
- You can always improve a rubric. Each time you use a rubric, you will find ways to make it more measurable,



friendly and descriptive.

- The best rubric is not guaranteed to be child proof. Your students may hone in on those unsuspected grey areas in your rubric, giving them exciting new grounds to challenge a grade. Don’t despair! Smile, be fair, learn from your mistakes and edit the gray area out of the rubric for next time.

Make it Measurable

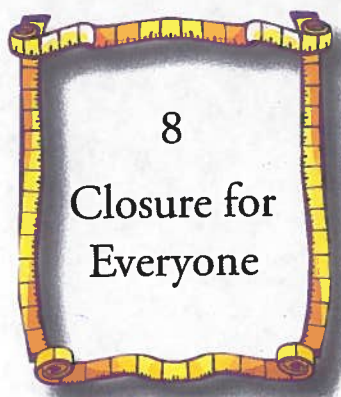
Instead of	Use
excellent	extensive and appropriate vocabulary
beautiful	colorful, clear and clean
great performance	good eye contact
fantastic delivery	evidence of rehearsal, script not read
good communication	used communication strategies to maintain conversation

Here are a few suggestions to smooth the implementation.

- Present the project to your students with a complete packet that includes the description of the project, the rubric, the time frame and support material. Students can stay better organized when they have an individual folder for the duration of the task.
- Discuss the objectives, expectations and time frame with your students.
- Consider appropriate options when forming groups. For example, students submit a list of the three partners they prefer. This can be a learning experience if students tell why they think they could work well with such people in the target language
- Set in motion all the checks and balances that will allow you to keep everyone honest, speaking the target language and on task.



- Set measurable deadlines. They can be 3 minutes or 3 days long and may be worth a percentage of the final grade.
- Take a few minutes to set up your room for presentations. Create areas for the stage, the audience and a "grading station" with all the necessary tools (rubrics, forms, student lists, highlighters, grade book.)
- During the performances, the other students should provide anonymous feedback to the performers. Make sure you train them to be honest and positive about this first. Students can do this orally or in written form to keep everyone accountable. For language control you will need to provide a word bank to help them express their opinions in the target language.



Before rushing on to the next big project, closure can solidify the lessons learned.

- The class can reflect on what they learned and where to go from here.
- Students can provide suggestions for improving the task and rubric.
- Student can share techniques that they learning from each

other's performance

- They can share their products with other classes, other schools, parents, on DVD with students from other countries.

References

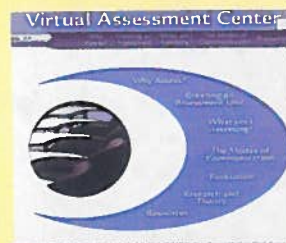
- ACTFL. (1998). In Swender E. & Duncan G (Eds.), ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners. Yonkers, NY.
- Curtain, H., & Dahlberg, C. (2004). Languages and Children: Making the Match (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc. (Original work published 1988)



Eugenia Porello was born in Córdoba, Argentina. She is an artist and a teacher. After graduating as a teacher of English from the National University of Córdoba and taking her first steps into the language classroom, her relentless drive to sketch everything around continued to grow and develop. She now teaches eighth grade students in the Princeton Regional Schools. She has a Master's Degree in Applied Spanish at The College of New Jersey. She is also co-authoring her first book on the use of legends as a vehicle to teach Spanish.

Online Resources for this Issue

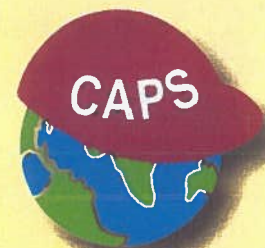
The **Virtual Assessment Center** hosted by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (www.carla.com/assessment/VAC/) offers an excellent overview of assessment. It answers essential questions like "Why assess?" and "What am I assessing?"



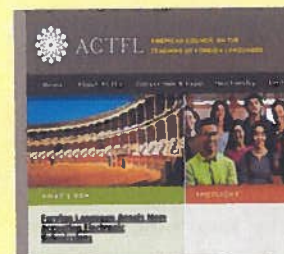
Center for Applied Linguistics (www.cal.org) offers information about oral proficiency testing for early language learners. Also available are the Foreign Language Test Database and the CAL digests.



The Consortium for Assessing Performance Standards (www.flenj.org/caps/) offers free assessment tasks for download centered around themes and the three modes of communication. Each thematically organized assessment includes the task and rubrics. See opposite page for the article.



American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (www.actfl.org) The ACTFL performance guidelines mentioned in several articles are available in the publications section of the web site. The Executive Summary of the of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning is also available online.



Center for Applied Second Language Studies at the University of Oregon. Visit <http://casls.uoregon.edu/> for more information on the NOELLA testing. This attractive site includes articles and resources to support teachers and "proficiency-based tools for lifelong language learning and teaching." See article on page 18

